



**Speech by
Federal President Joachim Gauck
at the celebrations marking the bicentenary of the
Kingdom of the Netherlands
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It is difficult to celebrate an anniversary in times of grief. It is only six weeks since the Malaysian aircraft was shot down, since this terrible incident in eastern Ukraine that killed almost 200 people from the Netherlands and wiped out entire families. The news on this crisis that reach us every day, the news from Ukraine, do not bring us peace or help us to feel calm. We remain deeply concerned, and our concerns grow every day. I know that your country is still in shock and that the pain is still there. And even if it is no real consolation, I would still like to tell you that I and many people in Germany were appalled by this dreadful disaster. On behalf of my country, I extend my heartfelt sympathy to all of the relatives and friends of the victims once again.

During these past weeks of mourning, the Dutch have moved closer together. Many people shared moments of contemplation – also in Germany. People showed strength through silent solidarity. And you dealt calmly with both your pain and your anger. This commiseration and self-confident show of solidarity also made a deep impression on many, many people in Germany and serve as a role model for everyone who feels a sense of commitment to peace and human rights.

In these difficult weeks, it is all the more important that we stand together in Europe and in the entire western world. It is important that we remind ourselves of our values and achievements. Despite the magnitude of our grief and pain, these feelings make us aware of what we stand for and of what we do not want to lose. That is why it is good that we can celebrate the 200th anniversary of the Kingdom of the Netherlands together today. And that is why I say that despite

everything, this is also a day of celebration for me here in Maastricht, in this beautiful city that was named after a Roman bridge and now, more than ever, stands for the binding force, for all that holds us together in Europe. I am very happy to be here with you today and I would like to thank the National Committee for the Bicentenary of the Kingdom for its kind invitation. This is a very special gesture of friendship and trust, and I do not take it for granted.

Just over two years ago, on Liberation Day, I visited Breda, the city where German war criminals once served their sentence. The memorial ceremony in the Grote Kerk and the time that I spent afterwards with Her Majesty Queen Beatrix among the crowds of people celebrating joyfully in Amsterdam stand out in my memory. I am extremely grateful that it was possible for a close relationship to develop gradually between the Dutch and the Germans in the past years, after Germany's great power politics and racial fanaticism had brought terrible suffering to the Netherlands.

We are amazed and delighted to see that our two countries are close friends today. They are good neighbours in a united Europe, in a Europe that moved even closer together here in Maastricht. For decades, we have been political partners who work together to support freedom, democracy and human rights. We are outward-looking partners, and this is also in our own interests. We are rooted in our nation states, but at the same time and more importantly, we are connected in western democracies' cosmos of values. Foreign Minister, I am very grateful to you for emphasising this so eloquently today. And this is why I would like to speak today about the reasons and prospects for our two countries' international outlook.

On this day, as we celebrate the bicentenary of the formation of your state, we also recall how long it took and how difficult it was for our nations to reach this shared outlook. The Kingdom of the Netherlands was founded during the Concert of Europe era when the Congress of Vienna redrew the borders in Europe. In my opinion, one of the remarkable chapters of Dutch history is how the unitary state gradually developed into a constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary system of government following the return of the House of Orange-Nassau; how it became an open society based on the dignity and freedom of the individual, a society in which power is restricted and limited by the law. In other words, your country's recent history is also an example of a pragmatic process of constant state modernisation, as well as an example of institutions' ability to learn.

Most importantly, the Dutch could build during the 19th and 20th centuries on a tradition of freedom and tolerance, a tradition that has always impressed me. A civil society evolved in your country following the revolt against the Spanish rulers, during the "Golden Age" of the Republic when the economy flourished and Dutch merchants

sent their trading ships all over the world. This civil society allowed artists and free thinkers to thrive and attracted many people from other countries. Hence, it was no surprise that a national consciousness developed under the overarching roof of the monarchy, a spirit that made it possible for the many to unite in a "country of minorities".

Even if the way this society perceives itself has been shaken and called into question by some people at times in recent years, your country remains a role model, also for us Germans, of a political culture characterised by moderation, objectivity, openness and cooperation. You can be proud of your democratic tradition. And you can be proud that the people of the Netherlands raise their voices time and again and stand up courageously for freedom.

In many European countries, the process of national unity proceeded less peacefully than it did in the Netherlands. In Germany, for example, the longing for unity and freedom ultimately turned into nationalist hubris, into the glorification of one's own country and the denigration of others that goes hand in hand with this. After the First World War, which we have commemorated and are commemorating in many places during this anniversary year, totalitarian ideologies promising salvation gained ground in Europe, ideologies that replaced political realism and pragmatism with assurances of deliverance. The lowest point of this development was the genocide perpetrated by the National Socialists and the war that they spread across the world.

The concept of international understanding and European unification was only able to prevail to this day in the western part of our continent after the defeat of National Socialism and Germany in the Second World War. Eastern Europe – and my region of Germany was part of it – was only able to join this unification process after the peaceful revolutions of 1989 and the collapse of communism. As founding members of the European institutions, the Netherlands and the Federal Republic of Germany were united from an early stage in the desire to create a Europe of peace, freedom and prosperity. Through its outward-looking approach and its pragmatism, the Netherlands always provided us with guidance on this. Both countries worked hard to build a shared European house based on solid ground and common standards.

Federal President Gustav Heinemann came here to the Netherlands in November 1969 as the first German head of state to visit your country after the Second World War. The purpose of his visit was to ask for forgiveness. He said, "There can be no better justification for the current political endeavours than the prospect of future generations being able to say that law and freedom have become a protected tradition in Europe." When we hear such words today, we realise how far we have come on our path. And we recognise

how little this path can be taken for granted. Time and again, we Europeans also have to fight for our freedom. Time and again, we were called on to reshape our future.

Here in Maastricht we can experience how that succeeds on a daily basis. Here in particular, in the city where the European Union was founded, we sense that we have been connected for a long time by far more than the treaty that was signed here. Maastricht is a cosmopolitan city and meeting place that is shaped by its location between Belgium and Germany, between Flanders and Wallonia. The large numbers of students who come here from all over Europe make the city more culturally diverse. Moreover, politics and business work closely together across national borders in the Meuse-Rhine region. This also unleashes energy and serves as a fertile ground for ideas.

Here in this city, in this microcosm of cooperation, the opportunities provided by Europe become particularly apparent. Many people in the world long for such opportunities. They do not experience this level of freedom, prosperity, democracy and the rule of law in their home countries. Nevertheless, populist and anti-Europe voices are being raised within the European Union by people calling for a retreat to the nation state. Some citizens fear the dissolution of borders, a lack of clarity, and uncertainty. They fear the loss of identity and a sense of home. Fear of globalisation is often behind this criticism of Europe.

We must certainly take these concerns and fears among citizens seriously. We must discuss the problems brought about by our European and global outlook, and we must discuss them openly. Foreign Minister Timmermans, you and Federal Foreign Minister Steinmeier said that we must make Europe better and we must make Europe stronger. I agree. You said that Europe should not "try to do everything", but rather that it should "concentrate on the most important questions of our time".

If we explain European cooperation more clearly, if we make it more focused and lend it greater democratic legitimacy, then we will also win the trust of the next generation for the European project. For one thing should be clear: the nation state is no longer the safe haven that some people imagine it to be. We cannot simply withdraw, either behind the dykes or behind the mountains. We cannot live in isolation, but instead must keep looking to the world as reliable partners in the European Union and the United Nations, but also in NATO and the OSCE. And we should truly be aware of this, especially now in these critical days and months.

It is in our common interest for us to join forces in Europe. And this reflects our shared values. The European Union is not a threat to our nation states – on the contrary, it is what makes us capable of taking action in many policy fields in the first place. In a world where the power equations are changing, we are only strong if we stand

together. We can only solve many political, social, economic and ecological problems by working together. Moreover, our two countries are very similar and face the same challenges – from an ageing population to the digital revolution.

The Netherlands and Germany benefit from European and international cooperation, not least as trading and exporting nations whose economies have always been closely intertwined. During the process of industrialisation in the 19th century, the Rhine became a shared lifeline more than ever before. Rotterdam port and the industrial region in the Ruhr area became a single economic area. Today, all Europe is our common economic area. Freedom of movement, an internal market and a single currency have made it easier for people to interact and have simplified the exchange of goods and services. We would be worse off, not better off, without the freedoms provided by the European Union.

Global interconnectedness now forms the essence of our economies. Few countries are as globally connected, and thus as successful, as the Netherlands and Germany. By this, I am of course thinking of our multinational companies, which often manufacture their products in far-off countries. As a result, the Netherlands and Germany have a common interest in free, unobstructed trade – and in a regulatory framework that guarantees fair competition, particularly on the global level. We should therefore maintain and expand this framework together.

Hugo Grotius, the thinker from Delft who spent some time in my home town of Rostock, and whose work laid the foundations for modern international law, understood that freedom needs to have a framework. The Netherlands and Germany now work together in support of an international legal framework. The Hague, the legal capital of the world, bears witness to this. What began with the Hague peace conferences in 1899 and 1907 and consolidated as a peace-building institution in the Permanent Court of Arbitration has since developed into an institutional infrastructure for international law. It is good that genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes are tried in the International Criminal Court in The Hague. And it makes sense that the European Union moved its judicial authority and its law enforcement agency to The Hague.

Along with their partner countries, the Netherlands and Germany stand up on the global stage for universal rights. We see this as part of our responsibility. This is why we adapted our foreign policy to the new threats to peace following the fall of the Iron Curtain, initially in light of the acts of war in the Balkans and then in the wake of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. This was also shown by our joint missions in Kosovo and Afghanistan. It was not easy to take this step, and the topic also sparked heated debates in our countries.

Once again, we are currently discussing how to protect the lives of people in danger. When men and women are being tortured and murdered in Iraq, when entire ethnic and religious communities are in mortal danger, then humankind cannot simply give terrorists and mass murderers a free rein. And I hope that we will not just talk about this, but rather that we will find a way to address these issues together. However, one must give very careful thought to the questions of how aggressors should be stopped, who should stop them, and what role outsiders should play, regardless of which position one adopts.

Our responsibility in the world also includes helping people who seek refuge in Europe. Although we know that Europe will never be able to take in all the people who seek a better life here, we must remember that refugees, particularly those entitled to asylum, have rights that we as Europeans have undertaken to uphold. Solidarity is one cornerstone of our cooperation with others, and it is a special feature in our democracies. Many of the older generation will remember that Europe itself was a continent of refugees and displaced persons not too long ago. Our continent, and in particular my own country, only found their way to the values on which we now base our community in Europe, namely human rights, democracy, solidarity and openness, via a history of violence and wars. The Netherlands was also a pioneer in this regard and had a crucial impact on Europe. We should remember this when we weigh up what is right and necessary in human terms with what is politically feasible.

The Netherlands and Germany are not only active in the world; they are also outward-looking societies that are interested in attracting qualified immigrants. Time and time again, we face the challenge of making it possible for different types of people to live together in the same society. In this context, tolerance towards other cultures and beliefs has nothing in common with indifference. Tolerance is one of the virtues of democracy. Being tolerant means that we have to withstand and engage in conflicts; it means that we have to look for compromises. If these compromises do not come at the cost of our value system and if we are able to prevent the emergence or spread of parallel societies, then we will experience diversity as what it can also be for both our societies, namely as a cultural and economic gain.

When we believe in looking outwards and feel committed to Europe, this certainly does not mean that we have to become alienated from our home region or nation. On the contrary, only those who are firmly rooted in their home can also turn self-confidently to the wider world and treat others with respect. We all have several identities today – we are from Limburg or Mecklenburg, we are Dutch or German, and we are Europeans or citizens of the world. Diversity is at home in Europe.

Anyone who claims today that nation states and Europe have to be a contradiction in terms is mistaken and acting as if there were an easy alternative. However, there is no either/or; rather it is about both together. European countries have a greater say when they work and take on responsibility together. And the European Union needs strong and stable member states. What we need on both levels are self-confident citizens who add their voice to the European debate.

However, such debates will only lay the foundations for the future if they do not fundamentally call European cooperation into question, but rather aim to foster and safeguard it. It may be that some of our contemporaries regard Europe, our European Union, as a ship in distress on a stormy sea. Some faint-hearted people are thinking about abandoning this ship and setting off on the life boats – that is, the nation states. Yet in this type of situation, one does not stop steering the ship and cargo responsibly, but rather guides them safely to the harbour, using all one's strength.

If I were to continue now in this metaphorical vein, I would have to speak about the people of the Netherlands' maritime experiences and identity. But naturally, I shall conclude by speaking about another tradition, one that is connected to the topic of our meeting here today in Maastricht, that is, the Netherlands' international outlook.

I find that the Netherlands has a particular talent for looking and acting beyond the town walls.

At an early stage, before the emergence of political modernity, a Dutchman – as an early European – developed ideas that were ahead of his time, ideas that our Europe aspires to put into practice. I am referring to Erasmus of Rotterdam, the great humanist who paved the way to the Enlightenment. He was the first person to attempt to unite Europe in the spirit of humanity. As Stefan Zweig once noted, this led to a wonderful neologism being coined. The desire for understanding and conciliation, for dialogue and de-escalation, and for the inclusion of others was simply described as "Erasmism".

This "Erasmic spirit" can be felt here in Maastricht, here in the Netherlands. It is an atmosphere where talks are successful and new things are created. I look forward to further collaboration here in the Meuse-Rhine region, in our Europe which is too nervous at times, and in our single world.

My warmest congratulations to the Kingdom of the Netherlands and to all the people of the Netherlands. Long live His Majesty King Willem-Alexander and Her Majesty Queen Máxima! Long live the people of the Netherlands!